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ABSTRACT

The low number of students who enroll in advanced courses at community colleges creates a number of problems, including cost inefficiency. One of the benefits derived from writing across the curriculum is the value writing provides in personalizing instruction. Writing is a way of activating passive students and encouraging student interaction with course content. Through an alternate delivery plan that uses a writing-based system, advanced courses could be made available as independent study. There are five steps in implementing and developing an advanced course bank: (1) planning the content of the course, (2) writing the goals for each unit, (3) choosing the content, (4) selecting the presentation, and (5) making it work. Skills that will be required of students include reading study guides, taking notes, annotating and underlining, paraphrasing and summarizing, keeping a learning log, issuing memos, writing papers, and taking essay tests. Such a plan presents an alternative to the dilemma of sending students to larger schools to take advanced classes or raising the cost-per-student by allowing classes with low enrollment to be taught. (DF)

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Assuring Course Availability: A Writing-Based System for Independent Study

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Faculty in the community college are very much aware of the problems that may arise whenever they try to offer advanced courses in their fields. The pressure is always there to offer them: students need the classes to fulfill their program requirements or just to have a wider choice. As instructors, we hope to offer these courses as often as possible. We don't like to see our successful students transfer because they can't get the class they need--our programs become truncated and we miss the chance to see our students develop and to help shape their growth. Whenever we cancel a class for low enrollment, we all suffer. The five or six students who did sign up for it are frustrated and feel that the institution takes no personal interest in them; the instructors who planned it and prepared themselves to teach it are equally disappointed and their future motivation to develop a novel or exciting course is probably affected.

We have always known that our advanced courses would be more successful in attracting students if we could make our schedule more consistent, if we could depend on actually holding the classes we offer. The only solution we've had so far is to let these classes go with low enrollment, and that results in problems of a different kind. Lecturing to a group of three is really difficult; making small group projects work when there's only one group is practically impossible. Also, the cost factor is depressing, especially when budgets are tight. And it's not

an occasional situation: nearly every semester presents this dilemma.

One Possible Solution: Writing Across the Curriculum.

One of the benefits we've discovered in writing-across-the-curriculum projects is the value writing provides in personalizing instruction. Writing has become one of the most effective ways of activating the passive student, of encouraging student interaction with course content. We could use that characteristic to design a course structure that would let us overcome the low enrollment problem and offer classes to four, three, even one student in a much more cost-effective way than we've even been able to do before. Through an alternate delivery plan that used a writing-based system, we could make courses available as independent study. Since the plan would provide for this study to be actively directed by campus instructors, it would meet the needs of the less self-directed student that true independent study would not. It would serve students while at the same time retaining in the institution those who presently must transfer to get the courses they want. Moreover, since the system could take into account the wide variety of learning styles and preferences common to community college students, it might possibly improve the performances of those who consistently earn poor or borderline grades in traditional classrooms.

How can writing help? For faculty who have not been involved with a Writing Across the Curriculum project, let me review the basic premises on which they are built. The underlying idea is that writing can be very important to learning--that without some form of writing learning generally suffers or is minimally achieved. We believe that students need the skills that writing requires as well as those that are more fully developed through writing; in other words, this point of view sees writing as a fundamental part of the process of teaching any content. Research into the writing process has convinced us that writing is actually a thinking process, and without it, certain kinds of learning just don't take place.

Writing isn't just the expression of what someone has already learned; instead, writing is the learning in progress, the process of making connections among ideas. A writer's knowledge is what she creates as she writes, not a list of facts she has memorized. "Knowing," Brannon says, "is an activity and writing is one representation of this activity." As a writer thinks about what he wants to say, he shapes his thoughts and makes his own meaning out of them.

Bechtel describes the similarities between writing and learning as "striking," calling them both "active processes which utilize the whole brain, integrating sensory perceptions, experience, and

memory on several levels simultaneously." She goes on to say that "people who . . . write well have the means of discovering knowledge and of knowing that they know--powerful advantages in an era when information becomes obsolete rapidly and career changes are regularly expected." Surely this makes writing seem like a valuable tool for our students to use.

In Writing Across the Curriculum efforts, we talk a great deal about how writing teaches students to actively touch the content of a course, examining it, classifying, rearranging it, manipulating it, and most importantly, developing a personal relationship to it--all of which means they become active, self-initiating learners who learn far more than students who sit like passive sponges absorbing what teachers tell them is important to know. And when we're talking about a novel instructional delivery system that functions on a conference-by-appointment basis instead of a regular class meeting three times a week, we need the best way we can find to encourage students to take the responsibility for the learning, for formulating personal goals for their study and working toward them.

One important point. With this focus on writing across the curriculum, we are definitely not talking about teaching the writing skills we know as grammar, punctuation, spelling, or specific organizational skills or even paragraphing. Teachers

might choose to include some material of this sort when it is unique to or particularly important in their disciplines, but this isn't expected or even suggested. When instructors discover their students need help in certain specific writing skills or strategies, we can make it available.

The purpose of the project then is this. In order to make certain courses available to our students on a reliable basis, faculty will participate in a development program, adapting their courses for an alternate delivery system, one which they plan to implement through working with a few students on a regular schedule: supervising the learning contracts they develop together, teaching, advising, and conferencing with them as the course plan requires. In essence, faculty redesign their courses, following a system that outlines a basic structure and the types of assignment plans they may include.

How to Begin: A Writing-Based Delivery System.

We start by thinking about the content of the course. What kinds of material should be covered? How would it ordinarily be taught in the classroom? This provides the base for beginning. Now, what is necessary to adapt the course for an alternate delivery system, one in which teacher-student contact is less, where student responsibility for learning is far greater? It is the

planning for this that we need to give a great deal of thought to. We're talking about motivating students to persist, to assume more responsibility than they may ever have taken before. If any of them are ever to complete a course of study such as this, we will have to provide a structure and a means that they can use efficiently. We will need lesson plans that provide sequence, course guides that lead students through the learning process, access to study strategies that will pattern success in the work, testing procedures that make fair demands but don't overwhelm, papers that teach content while they demonstrate achievement, and contracts that allow everyone to understand the goals of the study and the rate and quality of the work the students are expected to produce.

Points to Consider.

Perhaps the biggest problem we have to deal with is the fact that we'll have so few students to work with in the group--maybe only one at a time. Roberts mentions "isolation from peers and instructors" as the main negative factor in individualized instruction, and we believe it, knowing how much students depend upon the group for the interaction and motivation that sparks their learning. But Moffett says the problem--and the bad name individualized instruction has received--resulted from the behavioristic approach most of the programs employed as they

tried to take all students through the same materials the same way, "except for some differences in pacing." We need to pay more attention to individual needs and goals. Roberts also cites Cross, who says that students make "individualized instruction a success or failure for themselves," that the "active, inquisitive students" will be the successful ones, and that those who have more passive habits will not have their needs met by traditional methods. She goes on to say that their failure may be the outcome of "the instructor's enslavement to a program or because the teachers make the students passive. . ." That seems a bit strong, but it makes it clear that students will have to take active roles in the kind of course we're planning.

In comparing the effects of discovery and expository learning on independent and dependent students, Andrews found that discovery methods, where learners are encourage to generate conclusions inductively, meant markedly superior outcomes for independent students and noticeably superior for dependent students. The problem is that students are used to more expository or deductive approaches and say they prefer them; still it was clear in this study that the discovery approach improved student involvement. The optimal approach for dependent students might be what Andrews calls "an intermediate condition, providing some discovery elements within a structured context." At any rate, he suggests that "educational practice will be improved by carefully matching instructional approach and learner charateristics." Attention to

this may be critical for the success of the kinds of courses we are working with. And an added benefit supports what I said earlier about writing as a means of learning: Andrew suggests that we might inform students about their favored learning styles and then offer them a choice of formats for the course, saying an "additional benefit of this procedure might be that the student would become more aware of his or her own learning patterns and view growth in those patterns as a superordinate learning goal," perhaps enhancing his learning in every class he takes.

This mention of learning styles takes us to McCarthy's work, which may provide a useful way to approach this problem. Her description of the four quadrants in which learners operate may be helpful in making choices about modes of presentation and help faculty who are looking for new ways to shape their instruction to better coincide with student learning patterns. Some specific ways to make use of McCarthy's theories will be discussed later.

So, to begin. It's a bit like the first time we prepared to teach every class we've ever taught. We have to start with the <u>what</u> so we can make some plans for the <u>how's</u> and <u>when's</u>. In this case, the content is especially important. Future decisions about sources, delivery, activities, requirements, and evaluation will be directly based on what we decide we want our students to learn, so it's important to define very exactly what it is we want them to know and understand.

Implementation: Developing the Course Bank.

To enable faculty efforts in developing a group of courses readily available as a resource for independent study, I have researched related fields, prepared an annotated bibliography of useful publications, developed a system for course adaptation, and written materials for use in designing assignments. The next step is for faculty to begin the process of course development, following these directions:

I. Planning the content of the course. The initial step is to list the main content areas of the course as you now teach it. Then, list the major topics you wish to include in each of those main content areas. When you have assembled the main content areas with the major topics for each (and major sub-parts where needed), you will have the basic outline or structure for your planning.

The next task is to examine this content you plan to teach to determine the general organization it uses in your discipline. These questions should be helpful in accomplishing all of this:

What major sections are there in your course?

What sub-sections does the content of each section generally fall into?

What order is appropriate for teaching the parts of each section of information?

Which sections (or parts of sections) will require special emphasis or extra time (and how much of each) because of their importance of their complexity?

What methods or techniques do the best job of teaching in each section?

One thing more before you begin to write. Consider where the students are likely to be when you get them. How familiar are they with the course material? Is that background appropriate for what you want to do or do you need to deal with some gaps in their knowledge, some negative attitudes about the course content, or perhaps some preconceived notions about how difficult the class is? There's no point in making it harder for everyone concerned if some attention at the beginning will convince students the work is worth doing, has some real connection with

their goals, and is something they can realistically expect to succeed in.

II. Writing the Goals for each Unit. In step 1, you divided your course into sections; now consider that each one of those sections will be a unit in your course. The next step is to begin planning the instruction for those units. To begin this, you need to draft several (4, 5, maybe even 7) general statements that make it clear what your students need to accomplish in each unit. Each statement needs to be worded as exactly and concretely as possible, so you can evaluate students' ability to do it. Think of these statements in terms of what your expectations are for completion: what do the students have to know and what must they be able to do when they are finished with each section of your class? The goals need to be specific enough to work as your basis for designing the course activities, so the more precisely you can state them, the easier they will be to use later. By building the course content and activities around these goals, you can be sure you're covering all the material you said was necessary for the course.

Step two then is a draft of the objectives for each of the units that you listed in Step one. When you've finished this, you'll know what specific units your course will contain and what students have to know and be able to do to complete each unit.

III. Choosing the Content. Now that you have the objectives for each unit, what material will you use to teach them? For this step, you have to pull together all the specific materials you will use--your texts, your notes, your handouts, exercises, plans--whatever you have been using to teach the class. Then you need to assign these materials to certain units, deciding what to use for the instruction in each section. Work through the objectives ones at a time, making a list of material that covers the content for each one.

IV. Selecting the Presentation. What will be the best way to deliver this content? If a traditional lecture seems the best choice, can you videotape it? Does it need to be presented in print? Would it help to get it on a computer? This is the time to think creatively, innovatively. Why not start by envisioning the best of all possible ways that the content might be presented and then see if there's a way to make it work?

Because we're talking about independent or very small group study, we have to consider the demands this makes on students. How able are they to follow directions and how capable are they of performing on their own--in other words, what kind of assistance will they need? What do you need to do in order to

direct their learning from a distance? Considering these things will let you decide how to design the delivery. Should they be watching and listening to someone lecture either in person somewhere or on tape? Should they read something? Or is it a 'go find' situation? Whatever is appropriate, you need to plan how to give them this information, to provide the "directional device" that will guide their activities. Of course, your materials will be complemented with opportunities for questions and responses during your meetings with your students--this is not a correspondence course. It's that active interaction between teacher and students that will make their progress dependable, but you'll want to spend that time in conferencing, not in presenting the course content. So they'll need explicit directions for working through their assignments on their own.

This might be a good time to consider incorporating McCarthy's work into your course. She describes 4 different learning styles that we naturally use, with some of us favoring one style or another or often, a combination. The point is that traditional school-type learning assumes we can all learn the same way--and perhaps we can, but not as efficiently as we could some other way. So now, while you're considering how to present the information in your course, you might think about how to adapt to learners who don't do too well with listening to lectures or reading textbooks on their own. When you're working with students who haven't been highly successful in their schoolwork, you might consider that at least part of the problem might be their learning style preference, and in this project, paying attention to this detail might be very important to their present chances of success. At least, McCarthy's work could give you some ideas for presenting your content material--not that we should throw out lectures and texts, of course. It's just a point to consider.

Step IV then consists of going through the content and deciding how to present it to students, how to deliver the content so they get the information they're supposed to learn. Remember that the goal is that your meetings with them will not be for instruction, but for discussion and conferences about progress. The instruction needs to be available without you.

V. Making it Work. (Where the writing-for-learning comes in.) Given that many of our students are unpracticed in directing their own learning, quite likely to procrastinate, and not particularly adept at seeking our information (or help), what do you need to do to lead them toward success? Let's go in with the idea that simply assigning an activity isn't enough, that each one needs to be directed, cued, and monitored.

These directions and cues will come from a variety of writing activities built into the course. Presenting students with

objectives for each unit and then listing the required activities through which the content is available will never guarantee learning for our students. Instead, we need to write assignments that describe all the learning activities and guides that will let the students know very specifically just what they need to do. These study guides are actually systems designed to help students work with course materials, and they should explicitly direct how the students should interact with the course content, telling them how and when to do whatever they must do in order to understand and learn the information.

THE STUDY GUIDE

The study guide explicitly directs the student's work, giving thorough instructions for each assignment--for reading, listening, watching, writing, perhaps even where to focus their thinking, as well as prescribing the order in which they should do all these things. Writing a useful study guide involves deciding how your students need to interact with the materials you assign and then formulating directions that will lead them step by step through those processes. Students need to know what your purposes are for the assignment (the learning goals), what strategies you want them to use, and what they're supposed to know or have produced when they are finished. Because many students are passive readers, you will need to tell them what to skim over and what to study, what to look or listen for, what to mark or take notes on, and what questions to ask themselves (and us). You might also need to give them extra information--vocabulary, background data, etc. Independent learners are able to understand the demands of a task, they can recognize the structure and main ideas of the material they are working with, and they have strategies they can use to learn on their own, but when we work with students who haven't developed these skills, we have to teach them how to do these things. Therefore, consider how you might best use the following writing-for-learning activities in your course and build them into your study guides.

TAKING NOTES

Taking notes will be an important part of this independent study system, as many types of classes will require students to attend lectures, view video tapes or listen to audio tapes, look at displays of materials, or take field trips on their own. They will need an efficient, automatic note-taking system that compels them to focus on main ideas and see the relationship between ideas, one that will serve as a record of what they've learned and as a useful study tool. If you present your adaptation of the information processing note-taking system, having students

take notes on the right half of the page and indent supporting material under main topics, you can then direct them to abstract the key words and main ideas in the left column and to use that column for reciting and reviewing. Such a system is extremely flexible: you can use the notetaking handouts I have already prepared for students, perhaps adding a single page handout of your own to pattern whatever special sections you want in their note-taking format, and you can direct whatever review and study activities you wish.

ANNOTATING & UNDERLINING

When the purpose is to learn new information, the kind of reading our students generally do is not sufficient. Because they can read every word and not comprehend the message, we need to ask them to underline the key words that carry the main ideas of each section of reading assignments and to write their understanding of the passage in their own words in brief margin notes. Our students need to learn the value of annotating as a way of studying that can make their efforts much more efficient: they will understand and remember content better because they translated it into their own words and wrote it down, and they will become aware of how this kind of active reading makes later review and study much easier, saving them the time and energy they now spend trying to reread <u>everything</u> and letting them use their efforts for reviewing what they've already defined as important information. So when you're asking them to teach themselves through printed matter, tell them what sections they need to annotate.

PARAPHRASING AND SUMMARIZING

When the content of reading material is unfamiliar or difficult, we can help students better understand it by assigning paraphrase, asking them to restate the meaning in their own words. They may need to paraphrase especially difficult material sentence by sentence, a process that takes more time than they're used to spending on their assignments (or consider it appropriate to spend), but when we know their learning depends on it, we need to assign it. Asking them to summarize material into a briefer form is another excellent writing task for material that you want them to really <u>think</u> about, since summarizing practices high level intellectual skills. Generally, paraphrasing and summarizing assignments should be reserved for only the most important material, since both require a good amount of time, especially for unpracticed students. However, the learning that can be achieved and the skills that can be acquired make them both extremely valuable activities.

THE LEARNING LOG

The learning log is an informal record of notes the learner writes to himself in the course of his work. In the form of paragraphs, outlines, or even lists and phrases, the log is a very helpful thinking tool, allowing learners to focus their attention on certain topics or issues and clarify what they mean, deciding how something relates to something else, recognizing underlying structure, and reinforcing learning. Also, this kind of informal writing activity can help students get started on something, work out a problem-solving strategy, and keep track of their progress. In other words, the log is a journal type of writing that lets students respond to, comment on, and connect with the information they are studying, a kind of interaction that is essential to independent learning. The log's special value is its flexibility: you can ask students to write log entries for all kinds of learning situations, getting them more actively involved with their work, making their own progress more obvious to them, and helping them know when to ask you for help. Prompted by your specific questions, their log entries might deal with defining important points, describing connections between ideas, comparing situations or processes to previous learning, making inferences or generalizations, raising doubts or objections, composing personal responses. The goal is to have students write log entries that enhance both their learning and their perception of it.

MEMOING

Memoing, as a student writing activity, is very closely related to journal or log writing. It has, however, one important difference that makes it valuable: because it has a real audience (the instructor), it may receive more care and attention from students than they sometimes give writing they do only for themselves. Also, memos written on a regular basis--either time or assignment based--keep instructors informed of students' progress and allow intervention before problems become serious or students become discouraged. Like the student log, memos are flexible tools and work well in conjunction with other learning activities; they might focus on what students have read, report progress on projects, integrate activities, or share a log entry. Building a memoing component into your course is an excellent way to establish and continue good communication between your students and yourself.

WRITING PAPERS

We assign a course "term paper" or "paper" as a means of teaching something we consider important in our fields--generally to develop skills in discipline-specific and discipline valued kinds of writing. For our independent study courses, we especially need to devise assignments that do not overwhelm our students, to give themtasks that teach the skills they need within a process they can manage and still produce a course-significant product. Assignments for papers should consider goals that reward personal insight rather than just report facts, encourage thinking skills in generating, problem-solving, choice-making, integrating, and synthesizing, and help develop real intellectual maturity. A paper is probably well worth including in your course, since you can use it to achieve a specific interaction between your students and the course material while at the same time you would be teaching them a mode of writing that is important in your discipline. The process you assign can show them what they need to do (research, note-taking, taking a position, organizing their evidence) and make it clear what content is appropriate; giving them a model paper can clearly define your expectations for form and presentation in a successful paper.

ESSAY TESTS

Many of our students say they prefer "objective" tests because they are more fair, but the truth is that they fear the essay, believing it is difficult to write. They don't know how to analyze the demands of essay items, and they can't confidently fulfill those requirements. However, when we comply with their preference for true-false and multiple-choice, tests can become exercises in returning a teacher's ideas intact and unconsidered, no more than experiences in rote learning. When this kind of learning is not appropriate, when we want students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize--to demonstrate mastery of ideas and concepts instead of simply recalling and recognizing, we can rely on the essay exam to prompt these kinds of responses. If we reserve the essay for testing the learning of significant course content, making it the integrator of a sequence of learning; if we focus our questions sufficiently to allow the student to say something substantive and phrase them to lead him to synthesize his learning, make new connections, or see the material in a new way, we would be using the essay test as a important tool for instruction. Furthermore, when we make the task clear and obvious by using exact direction words and by making our evaluation plan explicit; and if we provide some basic instruction about how to compose a complete and impressive beginning, how to assemble content into a put well-organized, logical package, and how to wrap it up with a memorable

conclusion; the essay test could become a more accurate and more individualized method of evaluating the progress of our independent study students.

The motivation behind this plan is not grandiose; there is no intent to replace any instruction available in the classroom with all the benefits we know we can provide for students in that traditional setting. What we can accomplish through using this plan is a limited alternative, one way to deal with our present dilemma of sending students elsewhere or raising our cost-per-student by letting classes go with lower-than-minimal enrollment. This format would allow us to develop a readily available, educationally sound bank of classes for independent study in which we could enroll our advanced students with ease and confidence.

ASSURING COURSE AVAILABILITY: A WRITING BASED SYSTEM

---a format for developing a bank of classes for independent study with community college students.

---using writing-across-the-curriculum techniques to activate, motivate, and encourage students.

THE SYSTEM

1. Listing major ideas/concepts of course content, organizing them into appropriate sections, establishing useful order of topics, assigning particular emphases, considering feasibility of teaching modes/techniques.

2. Writing goals for each section, clearly stating what students need to know and be able to do when they finish each section of the course.

3. Gathering instructional materials for each part, covering all objectives.

4. Selecting the most effective presentation for each part, considering content requirements and student needs and preferred learning patterns.

5. Devising writing-for-learning activities that direct student interaction with course materials:
   - following study guides
   - taking notes from presentations
   - annotating and underlining
   - paraphrasing and summarizing
   - keeping a learning log
   - memoing the instructor
   - writing papers
   - writing essay tests

<u>An independent study system that works</u> will keep students learning, keep them feeling positive about the college's commitment, and keep them on campus!

Julie Bertch
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(handout)

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